Education ≠ Smart ≠ Intelligent

He stood there—wiping the sweat from his brow as the blazing sun beat against his back. Expertly, he guided the cow into the barn and prepped it to milk. Fast-forward, he is turning 76, a pile of birthday cards at his feet. He looked to me almost embarrassed and asked, “Would you mind reading these to me?” At first I am confused, but that is when I realize—my grandfather cannot read. Before that point in time, I had believed that being *smart* was directly related to the amount of schooling you had completed. If that were the case, I would technically be ‘smarter’ than my grandfather because he dropped out of school in the eighth grade. But surely I must be mistaken, because my grandfather knows more about the world than I could even comprehend. Through this assignment, I realized that *smart* is different than being intelligent or educated.

The word *smart* comes from the Old English word *smeortan*, which means to cause sharp pain. According to the *Oxford Dictionary,* the word *smart* began to adapt to meaning *keen* or *brisk*, which, in turn, developed into meaning *mentally* *sharp*. Today the word *smart* referencing intelligence is largely something done in America. Rarely do you hear people use smart to describe a type of pain; socially the term has shifted from its original definition to a description of intelligence.

Intelligence has always been somewhat of a challenge for people such as teachers to determine. In order to determine how smart or intelligent someone is, you have to have a clear idea of what it means to be intelligent. Throughout history you see the attempt to set these ideas to a certain standard so that it could be measured and compared. Psychologist Alfred Binet was challenged in the early 1900’s by the French government to find a way to determine the success of certain students over others. He then created what is said to be the first IQ or intelligence quotient test that scored individuals based on their ability to answer certain questions (“History of Intelligence Testing” 1) It is clear, that even then, intelligence is largely attributed to academics. With that in mind, is intelligence, or how *smart* you are, determined by academic ability only? If so, it would seem that individuals who attend college or some form of higher education would be smarter than an individual who did not.

Cultural views on intelligence can show that being smart is more than book smarts. Elif Bulut wrote an article called “The Construction of Intelligence in Terms of Cultural Differences Between East and West”in which he referenced the article “The Geography of Thought”*,* by Richard Nisbett saying:

People in Western countries tend to view intelligence as a means for individuals to devise categories and to engage in rational debate, while people in Eastern cultures see it as a way for members of community to recognize contradiction and complexity and to play their social roles successfully. (“The Construction of Intelligence” para. 5)

Nothing seems to suggest that intelligence has to be reached through college or further education, however. Many people—especially right out of high school—can become very successful without ever attending high school or further education. This to me shows that being intelligence isn’t something strictly learned. As a matter of fact, looking at this information allows me to see that you don’t learn intelligence; it is something you do or do not possess.

The actual dictionary definition of the word *smart* (in terms of intelligence) according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* is to be “intelligent or resourceful”. In turn—the word intelligence is defined as “having the ability to learn and understand, to have mental acuteness, or information”. This is where we see that the two words are fundamentally different though frequently interchanged. Being *smart* is something you can learn, essentially, it is progressive, and so it can be furthered and developed. Intelligence is similar and often interchanged with *smart* because of the connection between a person and their abilities. According to Steven Arndt, intelligence is more a measurement, which is why tests such as the IQ test have been developed. It is how fast you learn, and your natural ability to process information. “A highly intelligent person will pick up more skills and knowledge in the same time as compared to the average person,” stated Arndt (Arndt 1). He continues to explain how you hear terms such as being “street smart” and “book smart” because people are referring to someone’s abilities to make use of their resources and skills; it is what they do with their knowledge and resources versus the specific skills they actually possess. Intelligence can be measured, whereas how *smart* you are cannot be.

With everything in mind, we can now look at the opinion that how much education an individual is given influences how smart a person is. We now know what *smart* is, but what does it even mean to be educated? In his same article “Know the Difference Between Being Smart, Intelligent, and Educated”, Arndt talks about how education is how well versed you are in something and how you adopt a “more civil demeanor” through teaching, training, and research (Arndt 1). Education is acquiring knowledge, and through that knowledge you can be presented with opportunities that allow you to use your skills and attributes to further your success and make you *smart,* as explained previously.

The connection and difference in being intelligent versus educatated versus *smart* is now very clear. Intelligence is something you must possess in order to become educated, for it is the ability to learn and process the information you receive through education. Whether a person is of high or low intelligence really only matters in determining how quickly or easily the information given to them through their education is processed. Education is the information itself; people go to school to be provided information that they may not have otherwise learned individually. Once you are in possession of that knowledge, it is how you utilize it that makes you smart. If you are someone who is highly educated, meaning you have gone to school and been given a large amount of information, and you don’t apply your accumulated knowledge in and throughout your life, you would not be considered *smart*.

My grandfather’s education only continued into eighth grade, so in terms of reading, developed writing, and mathematics, he is not at all knowledgeable. To some that would seem that he would be less intelligent, that he didn’t reach his full intellectual potential, but all things considered, college for him would’ve been unnecessary for the life he chose to live. He grew up a farmer, and continued the family business along with his brothers. The skills he needed were learned hands on, no degree required. He made enough to support himself and his family, and for him, it was the fulfilling enough. To analyze it in another perspective, we can look at my mother who attained her master’s degree in nursing. Schooling for her was required, and very necessary. To throw someone into an operating room and hope for them to catch on could have catastrophic consequences. College requires you to take classes beyond your major to broaden both your perspectives and your knowledge, but overall it is meant to prepare you for a career in your field. I don’t think I could argue that either my mother or grandfather is more smart, simply because they are just different. If you put them in opposite spots, my grandfather would have no way to know how to care for patients properly and my mother would have very limited information in regards to the care of the different animals. Both are smart in what they know and have gained experiences in either college or life that they would not have otherwise obtained.

Some might argue that basing how smart someone is on their life experiences and how they handle certain situations implies that college is not important. On the contrary, it simply depends on what direction your life is taking. College is an amazing way to further your education, expanding worldviews, personal views, and so much more. It is of great value especially in today’s society, but it is not inherently better than what a non degree holding individual might gain by going straight into the workforce or simply not attending college. In other words, neither experience is better, but instead, it is simply different.

If I were to ask my grandfather today, I don’t believe he would have any regrets about dropping out of school in the eighth grade. He has led a fulfilling life, and it required no college degree and no high school diploma. In fact, I would honestly say that he is one of the smartest people I have ever met; his views on life and his reason are things you could never learn in a textbook. He has skills, and knows how to use them. People believe *smart* is used to describe how intelligent someone is, and that is usually based on things such as IQ tests and academic successes, yet it isn’t. Although you will further your knowledge with schooling, you can learn things outside of school that you would never learn in a classroom, and it is how you use your opportunities that decides on how *smart* someone is or isn’t.

Works Cited

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